

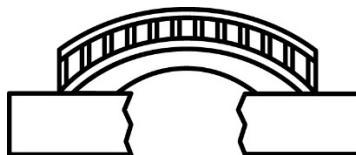


HEALING BROKEN TRUST: BIBLICAL RECONCILIATION IN RELATIONSHIPS



JAIME OWENS

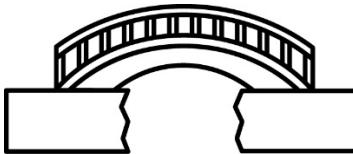
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INTRODUCTION:

Wisely navigating broken relationships may seem like an elite endeavor when it comes to Christian maturity. However, it is something that all Christians, no matter how far along we are on the journey, are called to faithfully pursue. As the pastor of a church in downtown Boston for over ten years, I have observed that among the greatest challenges our congregation faces is knowing what to do when relationships fail and fall apart. The Scriptures describe the church as the body of Christ and speak to the absurdity of disunity among its members. When it comes to broken relationships, particularly among believers, there is much at stake. And this naturally raises a deeper question: *what does reconciliation mean* when we are actually standing in the middle of relational hurt? In Scripture, reconciliation is far more than a gentle attempt at getting along—it is the intentional work of restoring what sin has fractured, both with God and with one another. My hope for this life skill guide is to lay a scriptural foundation for restoring broken relationships so that the gospel, the most stunning picture of restoration imaginable, will be on display in our lives.

In Biblical reconciliation, we see that the root cause of broken relationships is often a broken relationship with God. The sacrament of reconciliation in the Christian tradition provides a formal means of addressing these fractured relationships, offering believers the opportunity to restore their communion with God and one another. Through this sacrament, we can experience the healing power of Christ's forgiveness, which then enables us to extend forgiveness and pursue reconciliation in our relationships.

In Part One, I argue that the root cause of our broken relationships is our broken relationship with God. Part Two demonstrates how pride is often at the heart of our broken relationships and what to do about it. Part Three offers a biblical argument for why Christians must pursue restoration. Part Four puts forward the gospel as our model and motivation for restoration. Lastly, Part Five lays out some categories for restoration and what to do when restoration is hard.

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This life skill guide is primarily aimed at difficult relationships between individual believers. It is most useful in the context of mentoring relationships, to start a conversation about why broken relationships are a thing among Christians, and how the gospel inspires us to pursue restoration. If this guide sheds a few extra watts of wisdom on this challenging but rewarding part of the Christian life, my prayers will be answered. May God receive glory through the unity of his people!

1

THE BEGINNING OF BROKEN RELATIONSHIPS

Sin's Splintering Effects

Peace with God and peace with one another are vitally interconnected. By staring for a while at the first broken relationship—the one between God and our first parents, Adam and Eve, we gain valuable insight. Sin and its curse are the reason why friendships blow up, marriages splinter, and churches are shaken by conflict. Any hope of restoring broken relationships in our own lives must be rooted in the restoration of our relationship with God. If not, we'll be applying a Band-Aid to a terminal disease.

Before sin entered the world, the Garden of Eden was marked by relational harmony. There was harmony between God and man and, subsequently, between man and his wife. But as soon as Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, their relationship with God and with one another changed. Even before God confronted them and pronounced sin's curse, we see Adam and Eve attempt to cover their nakedness with fig leaves and loin cloths. Evidently, shame had crept on the backside of sin into Adam and Eve's marriage. Sin's curse also introduces a tension within the one-flesh union which Adam and Eve originally enjoyed. Tragically, this tension is easily seen today in fractured marriages: "Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you" (Genesis 3:16b).

Before Adam and Eve were evicted from the garden, as a demonstration of further brokenness, they blamed their sin on each other, the serpent, and even God. Things weren't the same after sin entered onto the scene, and they only became worse on the other side of the garden. Adam and Eve's sons, Abel and Cain, offer sacrifices to God. The trouble is that one pleases God more than the other. The result? Cain became resentful and

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murdered his brother, Abel. In the same chapter, we are introduced to Lamech, a descendant of Cain, who sings the world's first murder song to his multiple wives in Genesis 4:23-24:

Adah and Zillah, hear my voice;
you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say:
I have killed a man for wounding me,
a young man for striking me.
If Cain's revenge is sevenfold,
then Lamech's is seventy-sevenfold.

Lamech's song stands as a stunning delight in revenge and a pride that craves recognition, as though the murderer has done well. Evidently, murder—the highest expression of relational brokenness—spreads like metastatic cancer through the early chapters of Genesis. In chapter 6, God speaks to Noah, revealing his motive for a global flood: "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with *violence through them*" (Genesis 6:13). As one looks east of Eden, after the fall, the picture is bleak. Sin against God bears the bitter fruit of violence. This pattern of fracture with God leading to fracture between people is a hallmark of human depravity and one of the dominant themes of the Bible.

What does forgiveness mean in the Bible? Forgiveness in the Bible is not just about the act of releasing someone from offense but about the deeper work of Biblical reconciliation, which restores the relationship. The sacrament of reconciliation in the Christian tradition is rooted in this idea, offering a formal path to heal the brokenness caused by sin, both between us and God, and between each other.

Sin's Skyward Aim

We can look elsewhere to observe how sin against others is entangled with sin against God. The superscription of Psalm 51 tells us that David wrote the psalm after Nathan confronted him for his adultery with Bathsheba and his murder of her husband, Uriah. It says, "*A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone into Bathsheba.*" To say that his sin caused relational havoc is a great understatement. His family was devastated—the baby born of the illicit union died, and God warned him, "*The sword shall not depart from your house.*" Eventually, his son Absalom even attempted to take his life. It is nearly impossible to measure the magnitude of brokenness that began with a rooftop fantasy.

Most of the time, our eyes go straight to the relational demolition job our sin provokes. But if we listen closely to David's song in Psalm 51, it's clear that he understood that his sin was most fundamentally against God. This is why he cried:

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For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you may be justified in your words
and blameless in your judgment. (Psalm 51:4)

Through Nathan, God exposes the tragic nature of David's sin—premeditated adultery and murder. And yet David says, *"Against you, you only have I sinned."* His statement is not a dismissal of the pain he caused Uriah and Bathsheba. Rather, he acknowledges that even the most destructive human conflicts originate in a deeper rebellion against God.

There have been thousands of books written about why relationships fail—but the Bible teaches that relationships ultimately fail because we are estranged from God. If we miss this foundational truth, our attempts to restore relationships will focus only on symptoms rather than the spiritual disease beneath them.

Reconciliation Definition

Reconciliation, as defined in the Bible, is the restoration of two parties who were estranged or at odds. In the biblical sense, reconciliation always begins with God reconciling us to Himself, and only after that vertical relationship is restored can genuine horizontal reconciliation with others take place. This captures the essence of Biblical reconciliation—a God-initiated healing that transforms not only our standing before Him but also our relationships with one another.

Sacrament of Reconciliation

In many Christian traditions, the sacrament of reconciliation highlights this same truth. It emphasizes the need for confession, repentance, and the receiving of God's forgiveness. Through this practice, believers are reminded that reconciliation with others is grounded in being reconciled to God first. When we experience His mercy, we are empowered to pursue mercy in our own relationships.

Reflection Questions:

1. How might failing to recognize our sins as primarily aimed at God miss the mark in terms of restoration?
2. Do I rarely identify my own sin as the cause of my failed relationships and conflicts with others?
3. Have I noticed that when I fail to pursue Christ, my other relationships tend to suffer as well?

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4. How might regular engagement with the ordinary means of grace—God’s Word, prayer, fellowship, worship, sacraments—renew my relationships?
5. Do I have a “Nathan” in my life who is free to lovingly confront me when my relationship with God and others is off track?

2

THE PRIDE OF BROKEN RELATIONSHIPS

Self-Worship

Why are broken relationships so common, even among Christians? The answer is pride—and it's a problem for everyone. Our exaggerated sense of self-worth tempts us all to see ourselves as the center of the universe. In what seems like a former life, when I was a recruit at the Plymouth Police Academy, one of our instructors hammered us daily with these words: “You’re a legend in your own mind.” He didn’t know how right he was and neither did we. Pride is natural to us all, and if its aim is self-worship, its symptoms present as entitlement and self-aggrandizement.

In the garden, Adam and Eve were enticed by the Serpent’s promise, that in eating the forbidden fruit, their eyes would be opened and they would “be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5). They had an appetite for glory—but not God’s glory. This is a feature of our own depravity, and rather than moving towards one another with the goal of glorifying God together, we move away from one another to glorify ourselves.

James 4:1-2 is a text that serves as a trusty tool in counseling to help friends and couples in conflict because it highlights the selfish pride that is at the heart of our relational brokenness:

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.

James holds our feet to the fire. Pride, and it’s first cousin, haughtiness, which looks down on others, regards personal desire more valuable than peace. James informs us that there’s a battle being waged within every Christian. It’s a battle between the old, sinful nature, what the Apostle Paul

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refers to as the “flesh,” and our new nature, the life of the Spirit. James is saying that as the battle wages hot, often the sinful passions have the upper hand, and the result is fighting and quarreling. Put simply, we want what we want, and we’re willing to make a hash of our relationships to get it.

There are times when relational fracture is not our fault, and I will say more on that later—but when we find ourselves in conflict with others, we should always examine ourselves. Is there something I want from this person that I’m not getting? It could be something tangible like money or possessions or it could be relational like attention or respect. It is pride, in the form of entitlement that demands from others what we do not deserve. Pride would have us inherit the whole world, but we still wouldn’t be satisfied. Like a good detective, if we have broken relationships with friends, family, or church family, we should interrogate ourselves first to see if our pride is the culprit. It often is.

The High Cost of Being Right

Our relationships often come to an impasse when we are unwilling to admit that we were wrong about something. Summers at my grandparents’ house as a kid meant episodes of *Little House on the Prairie* on tap. A poignant illustration of the stubborn pride that keeps us from yielding to others is the episode called, “The High Cost of Being Right.” After the Garvey family’s barn burns down, they are left without a corn crop to sell. Jonathan and his wife Alice find their marriage severely tested because he refuses to accept help from anyone. Jonathan’s pride blinds him to reason, putting the most sacred of relationships at risk. The episode offers us a clear lesson: beware of foolish pride which can threaten to destroy what is most precious to us. Do you find it hard to yield to others? Do you often feel embattled in your relationships, as though it’s you against them? Have your relationships, rather than being marked by partnership and mutual encouragement, become a matter of subtle power dynamics? Pride can only move in after humility has been evicted.

Humility

Nobody likes to admit that they’re wrong. And the longer we persevere in having our way, the harder it is to change course. Pride digs in its heels, and like Adam and Eve after the fall, we start finger-pointing. We wiggle and squirm out of accountability. We seek to justify ourselves. We twist the truth and put forward shaded narratives that seek the advantage. We shift the blame, in part, because we’re blinded by pride, but perhaps most of all, to perpetuate our preoccupation with self-worship. Rarely would we admit this in such stark terms, but pride is cunning and persistent!

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If you know this is true, the Apostle Paul's words in Philippians 2:3-4 may come as a discouragement. He writes:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others."

Biblical Reconciliation offers us a model for dealing with relational pride. Instead of seeking our own advantage, Christian reconciliation calls us to humble ourselves and seek peace with others, even when we've been wronged. Through the sacrament of reconciliation, Christians are given the grace to confess, repent, and restore relationships, both with God and each other. This act of humility is not just a matter of social politeness but is central to living out the gospel.

As we reflect on Biblical reconciliation, it becomes clear that reconciliation is not simply about ending conflict, but about restoring the original harmony that sin has disrupted. When we allow pride to rule, we destroy the chance for peace. But when we embrace humility and the call to reconciliation, we restore what has been broken, not only between people but between ourselves and God.

What would a church who busied themselves with the pride-killing preoccupation of exalting others look like? What if being right lost its allure? What if our conversations, instead of fights and quarrels over unfulfilled desires, were a standoff between people determined to defer their own desires to bless the others? What if we relished opportunity to obey the command from the Spirit,

"Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor." (Romans 12:10).

That would be a church where self-worship goes to die. But pride must die first, and it can only die through the gospel:

"And he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised."
(2 Corinthians 5:15)

May the pride underneath the rotten floorboards of broken relationships be discarded—and may we, with God's help, lay a firm foundation of humility.

Reconciliation in the Church is vital to this process. The church is the community where Biblical reconciliation takes root, where relationships are restored not merely through human effort but through the power of the gospel. The reconciliation sacrament in the church provides a tangible means of restoring our relationship with God and one another, underscoring that reconciliation is central to the Christian faith.

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Reflection Questions:

1. As far as I can tell, to what extent are my relationships transactional? If so, how?
2. How might I apply the discipline of self-denial to my relationships?
3. In what ways could I intentionally outdo my friends, family, and church family in showing honor?
4. Would I dare to pray that God would humble me?
5. What are some strategies that you could share to kill pride and pursue humility?

3

THE HIGH STAKES OF BROKEN RELATIONSHIPS

Are You a Child of God?

The Scriptures teach that loving God and loving neighbor are two sides of the same coin. Moreover, we are taught that the latter is a great proof of the former. Anyone can claim to love God. But how do we know if someone loves God? A great indicator is whether we love others. And so, the claim to love God, if it is to prove credible, must be demonstrated by acts of love toward our neighbors. This is what the Apostle John is saying in 1 John 3:14:

We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. The one who does not love remains in death.

And similarly, in 1 John 4:20:

If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.”

Among the most remarkable examples of loving your neighbor is moving towards them to restore a broken relationship. On the flip side, to cut off your neighbor, refusing to reconcile, can be described as an act of hatred. Therefore, what we do with broken relationships either confirms or denies our claim to be born again and to love God. In other words, there is no love of God apart from love of neighbor. A primary goal of the Christian life is to close the gap between our claim of loving God and loving our neighbors. Too often, there is a chasm between the two, and to fail to integrate the gospel into this area of our lives is not without peril.

I am convinced that one of the chief marks of a Christian is that they cannot be at peace amid broken relationships. A child of God at his or her best is inclined to forgive, quick to admit fault, and eager to reconcile. In a phrase,

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Christians are peacemakers. Jesus says so in Matthew 5:9 in his startling introduction to the Sermon on the Mount. The Beatitude conveys not merely an attitude but also a practice of restoring broken relationships:

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” The promise confirms that peacemaking for the believer isn’t the work of specialists, but instead, Christians are to be general practitioners of peace.

In that same sermon, Jesus reveals what’s at stake when it comes to forgiveness among believers:

“For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”
(Matt. 6:14-15)

This is no quid pro quo. God doesn’t forgive sinners because they forgive others. Jesus is saying those who are forgiven practice forgiveness. But don’t miss the urgency of the warning. Jesus is saying, “Don’t think you’re a child of God if you’re unwilling to forgive others.” That’s a convicting word for most of us. Some of the deepest hurts come from God’s people. Pursuing forgiveness is among the hardest things that Jesus calls us to do—and yet, if we are Christians, it is what we do, even if imperfectly. If we refuse, we ought not be so confident in our standing before God.

We learn from this passage that loving our neighbors and being known for peacemaking should give us some measure of assurance that we are children of God. The 19th-century Scottish preacher Robert Murray M’Cheyne gave us that wonderfully balanced quote about gospel assurance: “For every one look within, give ten looks to Christ.” To clarify the gospel, in some theological circles have reacted against self-examination. It is true that ultimately our assurance comes by believing the gospel—thus, “ten looks to Christ.” And yet the “one look within” remains necessary, because genuine faith proves itself by deeds of love. The self-examination called for in passages like the Beatitudes should serve as an encouragement to those of us who are growing in the pursuit of restoring broken relationships.

Does Your Life and Church Preach the Gospel?

The author of Hebrews makes his own pitch for peace among believers, demonstrating how harmful disunity can be to the entire church. The stakes could not be higher:

Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no “root of bitterness” springs up and

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causes trouble, and by it many become defiled. (Hebrews 12:14-15)

Part of what it means to be holy is to be at peace with your neighbors. The author of Hebrews associates the unity among believers as so characteristic of the godly that to be at war with your church family is an indication that you may not “see the Lord” in a saving way when He returns. A quarreling Christian is an oxymoron. Those who are eager to scrap in God’s house are not His people. He writes this to us for our perseverance, to kindle the fires of conviction, that by God’s grace, we will address ourselves and those who have gone astray before bitterness springs up and spreads like leaven throughout the entire body.

These verses confirm what is true of most church catastrophes. They start with a singular spark between two, three, or a handful of members. Even the most steadfast pastors and members, because conflict is uncomfortable, are tempted to “wish it away.” But we come to understand that our own broken relationships, if left smoldering, can result in a bonfire that can devour an entire church. How many failed churches could have written on their gravestone: “Thrived for 100 years—died from a dirty look left unattended.” The lesson is clear. We must attend diligently to the unity of the church! Not only does Scripture teach of the dangers to believers and churches of leaving broken relationships unaddressed, but the Scriptures bear out that churches marked by infighting and disunity lie about the gospel. Consider Jesus’ prayer in John 17:20-21:

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

Jesus’ prayer reveals the stunning connection between our unity as a church and our corporate witness of the gospel. It is typical to think of evangelism merely as an individual endeavor—one to another. But Jesus’ words here cannot be dismissed. A unified church proves that Jesus has come from God! Unity is surprisingly evangelistic. It follows that a church marked by biting and devouring one another may be more of an impediment to gospel than one of its greatest arguments.

Reflection Questions:

1. Am I slow to forgive others, to admit my faults, and pursue restoration with other believers? Why do I think that is?
2. Is there a gap between my claim to love God and neighbor?
3. Are there any potential roots of bitterness springing up in me or in other members of my church? Have I prayed for the faith, courage, and wisdom to address them?

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4. Do I ever “wish it away” when it comes to matters of disunity in the local church? Do roots of bitterness and disunity often go unaddressed in my church? What am I going to do about it?
5. What are the possible implications for my local church’s witness of the gospel if I fail to pursue restoration of broken relationships?

4

THE GOSPEL: OUR GUIDE FOR RESTORATION

As we have already said, pursuing restoration with other people isn't optional for the Christian. As Jesus himself preached, extending forgiveness is a feature of discipleship, and refusing to forgive may indicate that we ourselves have yet to be forgiven by God. But why is pursuing restoration fundamental to the Christian life? Further, how can such a hard thing be expected of us? The answer is, because God has restored our broken relationship with him through the gospel. Our very lives are a testimony to the grace of a God who pursued us for restoration! Therefore, the gospel is not merely our best model for restoring broken relationships—it's our greatest motivator. By meditating on features of the gospel, we are equipped and inspired towards pursuing restoration with others.

And as we prepare to consider reconciliation more deeply, it is worth recalling *what is a sacrament of reconciliation* in Christian tradition—an act that underscores how seriously God treats the healing of broken fellowship and how central restoration is to the life of believers.

Reconciliation

The gospel begins with bad news. Because God is our maker, he is also our holy judge. When sin entered the world, the entire human race was plunged into sin. As a result, we are sinners by nature and by choice. Our sin is a grievous offense to a holy God—so grievous, that it demands eternal punishment. As Paul wrote in Romans 6:23: “For the wages of sin is death...” Earthly and spiritual death. Eternal death.

Before moving further, it is helpful to remember that all of this fits into the larger theme of *Biblical reconciliation*, where God moves first to restore what sin destroyed.

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But at the heart of the gospel is a God who loves his enemies. Paul wrote in Romans 5:8-10:

But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.

Jesus did not come into the world to save his friends. On the cross, he bore the wrath of God for his enemies—for you and me if we're trusting in Christ. The claim that we are at war with God may shock you. Heck, it may even offend you. But consider how the Psalmist describes the unbelieving world:

Why do the nations rage
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel
together,
against the LORD and his
Anointed, saying,
Let us burst their bonds apart
And cast away their cords from us. (Psalm 2:1-2)

This is why believers are entrusted with the *ministry of reconciliation* verse in 2 Corinthians 5:18–19, reminding us that God Himself initiated reconciliation and calls us to carry its message.

Why would God desire to reconcile to himself his own enemies who have raged against his benevolent rule? This is the wonder of the gospel. If we search the Scriptures for an answer, what we find is a God whose love conquers our rebellion. Why did Jesus choose you in eternity past, with full knowledge that you would live as a rebel before you were born again? He chose to love you, despite your sin, as a display of his mercy, for his own glory. Not to mention, the entire enterprise of reconciliation is a work of God, as Paul highlights in 2 Corinthians 5:18-19:

All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.

When it comes to reconciliation with God, he takes the initiative. He doesn't wait for us to move first, because we never would. Be amazed that in the gospel, God moves towards us to restore our broken relationship

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with him. Surely that has major implications when it comes to restoring our broken relationships with others! Just to mention one... God's reconciling us silences our objection that the people who harm us are unforgiveable. By sending his own Son to live and to die for wicked sinners in a world of sin, God models for us a special kind of love—sacrificial love. As one of my former mentors used to put it, “A love so rare it had to be imported from heaven.”

At the center of all forgiveness and restoration is *reconciliation in Christ*, because only through His work do we learn how restoration truly begins—with grace, sacrifice, and undeserved mercy.

Though relationships are messy, and sin grievous, our call is to be like Jesus, who initiated our reconciliation. In fact, the greater the brokenness, the greater display of God's grace through restoration. As the Puritan Richard Sibbes once preached, “There is more mercy in Christ than sin in us.” Do we desire to reflect the Savior? Then let us pursue reconciliation, even with our enemies, that the gospel will shine forth from us. If we are reluctant or unwilling to initiate, it may be that we do not fully grasp the gospel. Would we dare to be more severe towards sinners than God is? May it never be the case!

Justification

At the heart of reconciliation is a God who pursues. In justification, a God who pardons takes center stage. The Apostle Paul, in Titus 3:5-7 describes justification as an act of God's grace which effects an unimaginable shifting of fortunes:

... he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Because justification and restoration are deeply connected themes in Scripture, many Bible verses about reconciliation remind us that God is the one who initiates peace with sinners.

Benjamin Keach, in his catechism from 1695, known as the Baptist Catechism, defines justification this way: “Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein He pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in His sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.” Before we are converted to Christ through the gospel, our sins condemn us before God, our judge. But then we are justified by grace, Christ takes away our guilt and gives us his righteousness. By faith in Him, we are no longer regarded as guilty in the

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sight of God. More than that, we are heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Understanding the *reconciliation definition* Bible gives us an even fuller picture of this miracle: God not only wipes away guilt but brings estranged sinners back into restored fellowship with Himself.

It is as though we stood condemned at the gallows as insurrectionists, and in our final moments on the platform, as the sack went over our heads, Christ slipped on the noose and hung in our place. When we come to understand the gospel, the sack is pulled off and we see him hanging there, who willingly endured the sentence of death once declared for us, so that we may walk away with a new and better life.

My believing friend, have you gotten over the fact that despite your sins, you are justified before God? You are no longer guilty because Jesus endured the judgment that you deserved! But do you know that he did the same for that fellow church member you haven't talked to in weeks, months, maybe even years? The one that you take the long way around the aisles to avoid. Do you know that because of justification, the sins they still commit—even the ones that harmed you, God has already forgiven? It is true that God disciplines his wayward children, but as far as condemnation goes, there is none left for either of you. Jesus drank the cup of wrath for them as he has for you, and not a drop remains. What am I saying? That believers whom we have broken fellowship with are those for whom Christ died. And that should matter to us.

This is why *Biblical reconciliation* matters so deeply: if God has fully restored us to Himself through Christ, then refusing restoration with another believer contradicts the very gospel we claim to cherish.

At Christ's return, at the great judgement seat pictured in Matthew 25, you will likely stand side by side among God's sheep, as the whole world is separated in two. In view of the goats, breaking with the other sheep in that moment will be an absurdity. Or as John the Baptist described that same day in Matthew 3:12, that one you snubbed years ago will be gathered into the same barn with you as God's chosen and precious wheat instead of being burned as chaff in the unquenchable flames.

What if we reflected on the fact that God has reckoned our opponents "not guilty," having died to secure their redemption as he did for us? Should not their destiny as heirs of eternal life, along with us, move the needle in our willingness to pursue restoration? Would we condemn those whom God has pardoned at the cost of His perfect Son? Ask God that we might look upon His forgiven people as he does!

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Adoption

The word ‘adoption’ is mentioned merely five times in the New Testament, though its themes are woven throughout both Old and New Testaments. John’s Gospel opens with a stunning mention of Christian adoption:

But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God (John 1:12-13).

The Apostle Paul goes on in Romans 8:14-17 to further develop the doctrine of adoption, emphasizing the Spirit’s role, and thereby linking it to our sanctification:

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

Again, Keach’s Catechism is good for a concise definition of adoption. “Adoption is an act of God’s free grace, whereby we are received into the number, and have a right to all the privileges of the sons of God.”

In J.I. Packer’s classic work *Knowing God*, he writes the following about the doctrine of adoption: “Adoption is the highest privilege that the gospel offers: higher even than that justification...To be right with God the Judge is a great thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the Father is greater.” This observation has struck many, especially those with a hearty appreciation for the Reformation, as a surprising claim. But whether you agree with Packer on which is the greater feature of the gospel, there is no doubt that there is something uniquely appealing about God’s making us his children. I recall hearing a line similar to the following in years past: “In justification, you’re in the courtroom. In adoption, you’re invited into God’s living room.” Besides the God of Scripture, no one has ever heard of a God who calls himself father and who brings his formerly rebellious creatures into his own family, bestowing upon them all the rights and privileges of his perfect Son.

And it is here that *Biblical reconciliation* becomes deeply personal, for the Scriptures on reconciliation remind us that being welcomed as God’s children is itself an act of restored relationship.

You may be wondering how this inspires us to restore broken relationships. I want to argue that adoption, when one considers who is being adopted, is the most lavish display of God’s love, because God does

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not save us and send us on our way. He saves us to himself. Adoption reveals God's heart towards us, to be our Father forever.

A Christian pursuing reconciliation with a keen awareness of the grace of adoption isn't reluctant or stingy in their efforts to reconcile with others. They are not hedging their bets, giving a little, taking a little. Rather, they are all in, and like God, their goal is a full and enduring restoration. Their pursuit of restoration isn't dictated by the actions of the other person but instead is rooted in a love for them that reflects God's own love for sinners—a love that overlooks and transcends sins and offenses. This is simple to grasp, though hard to reflect. Only by grace and the power of the Spirit can we hope to pursue restoration so fully, as is displayed in God's adoption of us his children.

Sanctification

The final feature of the gospel to consider as our model and motivator for restoring broken relationships is sanctification. We can define sanctification this way: through our union with Christ, we are progressively enabled, by the Holy Spirit, to die to sin and live to righteousness. The Apostle Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:23, gives us insight into God's purpose in sanctification:

Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul here hints that sanctification is an ongoing work, as he is praying not only for a complete sanctification for the Thessalonians, but describes it as the whole man being kept blameless for the return of Christ at a future time. How is this accomplished? By the Spirit and the Word. As Jesus prayed in John 17:17:

Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.

As God's Spirit and Word are at work in the believer, progressively setting them apart from sin and enabling them to live to righteousness, they are kept for the Day of the Lord, where they will stand blameless at the judgment seat of Christ.

This slow, Spirit-driven transformation is also one of Scripture's reminders that Biblical reconciliation is not a momentary action but a lifelong process shaped by God's ongoing work in us.

How does this encourage us to pursue restoration? By faith, we believe that those who have sinned against us are a work in progress just like we ourselves are. God is fully committed to making them more like Jesus every day. The charge that so-and-so will never change, when levied against a fellow believer is a declaration of unbelief. It doubts the power

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of the God to transform and to keep his children. What could grease the wheels of forgiveness more than knowing that the person who has offended you is in the process of dying to that very sin, and that the Spirit of God is overseeing that mortification? It almost makes you want root for them despite the harm they've caused you. A greater awareness of sanctification, therefore, makes for a greater willingness to pursue restoration with those who annoy us and even hurt us.

Reflection Questions:

1. Do I acknowledge that apart from God's grace towards me in the gospel, I would be an enemy of God and deserving of eternal judgment? How should this acknowledgment change my posture towards difficult people?
2. Does my judgment of other believers, even those in their sin, differ from God's own judgment of them?
3. When it comes to restoring broken relationships, am I all in, or am I setting up boundaries that prevent a complete renewal? If so, why?
4. What does my view of those who I've broken with say about my confidence in God's power to restore?
5. Would I be willing to begin praying for those who have sinned against me, that the Spirit of God would put to death their sinful tendencies? How might God change my heart through praying for them?

5

WHEN IT'S HARD TO RESTORE BROKEN RELATIONSHIPS

Two primary categories of restoration are forgiveness and reconciliation. It is a common challenge to gauge if both, one, or neither are possible. Let's be clear, sin and its effects are ugly, and some offenses are so grievous that full reconciliation is neither safe nor wise. In some cases, making contact at all is off the table. It must be left to the wisdom of God's Word and the counsel of discerning friends and elders in your local church to consider the proper course.

Forgiveness

As we said earlier, Christians forgive as those who have been forgiven much. That is not to say that it's easy, or that our hearts will always be willing. But with God's help, forgiveness is possible, no matter how broken a relationship may be. This is one of the core truths behind forgiveness in relationships, where Scripture repeatedly calls believers to release the debt even when reconciliation cannot follow. In Colossians 3:12-13 Paul writes,

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

What makes forgiveness possible in every case is that it depends on the offended person extending it to the offender. Forgiveness, which is the

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canceling of debt—properly described, a debt incurred by sin—is not ratified by the repentance of the offending party. Though ideally, the offending party would repent, the burden of forgiveness lies completely upon the offended party. This means that you can forgive someone even when they are no longer present, or in circumstances where it would be unwise to make contact.

There is great freedom in extending forgiveness to others. We extend forgiveness in faith, trusting God with it, and whether the offender accepts it or not, a weight is lifted from our shoulders. With God's help, we have done our part. As we pray at all times for a heart free from bitterness, we can trust that God will grant us the freedom of forgiveness. Forgiveness is always possible, but reconciliation may not be.

Reconciliation

Reconciliation goes beyond forgiveness with the added feature of a repaired relationship. This reflects the larger theme of Biblical reconciliation, where restored fellowship mirrors God's restoration of sinners to Himself. The model of reconciliation is the Christian's relationship with God. The Bible goes to great pains to inform us of the benefits of our restored relationship with God through the gospel. As Christians, we should aim at a restoration with others that reflects our restoration with God. However, when it comes to broken relationships between people, this may not be possible. It's interesting how Paul frames Romans 12:18:

If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Notice the qualifier, "If possible." There may be some situations where it is unwise to seek reconciliation. When relationships were broken because of grievous sin like physical or sexual abuse, or in the case of past relationships with unbelievers when we were unconverted, or in the case where the broken relationship is with people far removed or deceased, forgiveness and nothing more may be fulfilling our duty before God and men.

To give an example, when I was converted to Christ, the reality of my past dating life sparked a controversy in my conscience. As a nominal Roman Catholic, I crafted my own moral framework, supposed it to be sound, and sought to live within its bounds. It required me to date women long-term, and monogamously, but there were few sexual boundaries. So long as I treated them with respect and stayed faithful to them, I was doing well. But after conversion, with a string of two-to-three-year relationships which I broke off to pursue what I thought to be a more interesting partner, I came to understand that I had sinned against each of them terribly. As a young Christian, I sought to manage my feelings of guilt, but when I would visit a

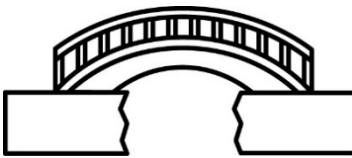
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certain restaurant in town, or a scenic overlook, memories came flooding in, battering the walls of my conscience. It is true that Jesus had forgiven all my sins, but the broken relationships, like rusted out antique cars along the path of my life had to be dealt with.

I sought counsel on what I should do, and it was decided that I would send a message to each of my ex-girlfriends, asking for forgiveness and explaining how the gospel had opened my eyes to my sin and to God's grace. I received precious few replies—what should I have expected? And yet, I had sought to do everything in my power to seek forgiveness. In my view, it would have been foolish to seek an in-person meeting with any of them or to try to restore our relationships beyond forgiveness. But through my efforts of partial restoration, the alarm bells of my troubled conscience were silenced, and perhaps the Lord would see fit, as he seemed to do, to bring about forgiveness. God is calling us as Christians to address every rusted-out relationship in our lives. Though reconciliation may not be possible, forgiveness always is, and each effort is an opportunity to tell of God's own forgiveness through the gospel.

Reflection Questions:

1. What is stopping me from pursuing forgiveness—either extending it to others, or pursuing them to forgive me?
2. Am I in the habit of seeking counsel, including the elders of my church, to wisely navigate restoration?
3. In what ways will forgiving others bless me?
4. How could reconciliation result in an even stronger bond between me and another person?
5. Am I doubting God's power to restore my relationships?



CONCLUSION: HOW TO GET STARTED

In short, we can always pursue some form of restoration, be it forgiveness or reconciliation. And for every believer wrestling with how can we forgive when the damage runs deep, the Scriptures remind us that forgiveness is an act of faith, not feeling—one that God enables as we trust Him. As a principle, we should always pursue as much restoration as circumstances allow, and we should pursue wisdom to know what the best course is. This is why it is God's will for his people to be members of a local church. It is among the saints, committed to "bear one another's burdens" (Galatians 6:2), where we will be encouraged, challenged, and spurred on to do the vital work of restoring broken relationships in our lives and in the life of the church.

It's also important to realize that the pursuit of restoration is often a long road. Therefore, we should ask God not merely for wisdom, but for patience to keep pressing on when our attempts seem to falter or fail. God is more eager for the unity of the body of Christ than we are. Related to the need for patience is the observation that God is sovereign over every broken relationship. Even when there's little or no reciprocation in our efforts towards restoration, we can trust that God knows exactly what going on and as we obey in faith, he will bring about restoration as he sees fit. This confidence fuels the importance of forgiveness, reminding us that forgiving others is not optional but central to the Christian life.

Finally, we ought to pursue restoration joyfully, with our eyes fixed on the New Jerusalem of Revelation 21. There will be no brokenness in the New Heavens and the New Earth. No violence, tears, or sin will be there either. God's Word promises that all things, including God's people, will be restored. Until that day, God calls us to restore the broken wherever possible, offering a small but meaningful preview of the full restoration to

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come. As the first fruits of God's New Creation here on earth, our lives should display God's purpose of restoration in our relationships with one another. May God give us the strength and wisdom to do it!



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